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ABSTRACT

There has been a long-standing national concern about students considered to be at-risk. This paper explores the problem in a high school in the greater metropolitan New York area, focusing on female students in grades 9 to 12, and makes recommendations as to how school officials and parents can help these students. Three elements of the school must be considered when studying at-risk students: (1) the school culture; (2) the curriculum; (3) and a caring community. These students, many who lack support from home, need help in interpreting the life they are living. Since it is likely that adolescents' world views correlate with the world views of the adults in their lives, it should be realized that adolescent peer groups generate a sense of identity by drawing on adult institutions. For at-risk students with little or no parental involvement, the members of the educational community are the key players in teaching students to study their own lives. Adolescents need positive experiences that promote personal and social growth. Some of the recommendations made here include: schools need parents as active participants, schools must set up mentoring programs to engage all students, and schools must remove impediments to school membership and academic engagement. (RJM)

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Suffer the Children...and They Do

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The high school students of today are the leaders of the 21st century. The newspaper headlines, television, and radio are filled with stories of loss of hope, crime, disease, poverty, and a lack of heroes. Public figures such as John Bradshaw, T. Berry Brazelton, Fred Rogers and others attempt to educate us in the dynamics of family systems theory, addiction, and children who rear themselves when parents fail them. Parallel to these issues has been a long-standing national concern about the group of students we have identified as at-risk.

A recent research study of perceived academic and membership impediments to female, at-risk high school students was conducted at a high school in the greater metropolitan New York area. The student population identified were in grades 9 to 12. The students in these grade levels have spent approximately nine years in a school setting. The age level and verbal ability of the students allowed for the gathering of data through the interview process.

Two full days per week from October 1994 to January 1995 were spent at the high school. This provided an opportunity to become trusted, observed by the students and staff, and ultimately to become unnoticed. Freedom to walk the halls allowed for the observation of the culture of the student and teacher cafeterias, the ebb and flow of traffic

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in the front office, the guidance suite, and the health center, as well as developing a sense of the various feeling tones of the classrooms.

Interaction in the hallways permitted a comparison of what people did in relation to what they said. The circumstances of interviews ranged from planned, appointed times to informal sessions. The amount of time spent at the high school allowed for exploration of any predispositions and for the development of a deeper understanding of the students, staff, and parents.

Dropping out is an event in a long series of life stresses. In the past, dropout theories have linked students' background and family characteristics with dropping out. Over time, the concept of dropping out has evolved into the concept of at-risk, which focuses on the potential for dropping out. All students are at risk, but for some students, at some point, the risk becomes too high. There are active negative forces in the schools themselves, identified as impediments, which are causing some students to drop out. Impediments include: the lack of intrinsic rewards, obsession with covering curriculum, technical definitions of knowledge, mechanical perceptions of success, and lack of alternatives in the delivery of instruction.

At least three elements of the school must be considered when studying problems associated with at-risk and dropout students: the school culture, the curriculum, and a caring community. These three elements serve as an index of the school's ability to teach

all students. At-risk students need help in interpreting the life they are living, which in many cases lack support from the home. Decisions must be made on how schools are going to teach students the competencies they want them to have in order to succeed in the workplace of the future and the roles they can play in reconstructing their neighborhood and community. It is the responsibility of the school to engage at-risk students in reconstructing the community.

It has been argued that there is a significant correlation between the world views of adolescents and those of the adults in their lives. Most problems associated with teenage years are not unique to adolescents, since the crises and conflicts they experience are societal. The anguish and the uncertainty which comes from loneliness are accentuated when there is no connection to a family or a caring community. For most youngsters, the family, however dysfunctional, continues to be more influential than any other social setting. Adult caretakers, including parents and teachers, can help teenagers through this transitional phase by offering them the security of an expectable and "good enough" environment (Ianni, 1991). Contrary to popular belief, adolescence is not a sub-society that isolates them from the rest of the world. Rather, adolescent peer groups generate from the adult institutions that give them a sense of identity. Teenagers experience adolescence as a culmination of socializing environments, namely the family, community institutions, the peer group, and prior school experiences.

Schools are a cultural phenomenon. As is true of all social institutions, schools have their own culture. Research on successful secondary schools has cited common characteristics that include a quality of caring comprised of shared values, a sense of belonging, a sense of school membership, and academic engagement. It appears that the school culture permits staff to take an active, responsible role for the well-being of the whole school, as well as the students. In other schools, however, it appears that staff members do not work together to create a caring community, which influences the culture of the school.

For at-risk students with little or no parental involvement, the members of the educational community are the key players in teaching students to study their own lives. The principal is the keeper and changer of the culture of the school. He or she has the ability, skill, perseverance, and strength to create a school that cares about its children. In order to demonstrate that they care about the students, schools must be developing a sense of bonding and educational engagement in students. Bonding is attachment to the school, commitment to the school's goals, and, by extension, the academic future one imagines for oneself. Bonding is also described as school membership and has a four-part definition: (1) attachment through having social, emotional ties to others and having a personal stake in meeting the expectations of others (2) commitment or rational participation and conformity to school rules. Commitment demands equal continuous participation and implies current plus future rewards; (3) involvement or engagement in school activities; and (4) belief or faith in the institution (Wehlage, Rutter, Lasko & Fernandez, 1989). Educational engagement refers to the psychological investment required to comprehend

and master knowledge and skills explicitly taught in school. Educational engagement results from a positive interaction between students, teachers, and curriculum and requires determination, concentration, and commitment by students. This engagement is also highly dependent on the institution's contribution to the equation that produces learning.

Currently researchers are taking a different approach from that which they have done in the past and have identified ways to overcome impediments for at-risk students by focusing on academic engagement and school membership. Educators should not simply keep youth from dropping out of school but should provide them with educationally worthwhile experiences. In order to create successful interventions for dropouts, attention must be given not only to the at-risk students, but to the relationship of these students to the school as an organization or social system.

Positive experiences that promote personal and social growth through engaging and integrating activities do contribute to reducing at-risk consequences. Often, schools do not clearly indicate what they do and what can be expected of them. In too many cases, counselors do not have a clear picture of the role they should play in relation to poor or low-achieving students. Counselors, unfortunately, determine who will be served and who will not be served. In many incidences, academic enrichment and career guidance are for the gifted, not for those less advantaged. In a sense, the counselor is a systems analyst in that he or she helps members of the system conceptualize their problems in ways that allow them to ask significant questions and develop problem-solving capacities. This

approach suggests that high school counseling must go beyond the format which limits its concern to vocational planning, career or college selection, diagnostic appraisal, or traditional counseling to meet the specialized needs of the at-risk students.

According to Secretary of Labor, Robert Reich (1989), work in the old economy meant simple tasks that could be repeated, productivity was high volume and low cost, education prepared people for “cog” jobs, and small numbers of the population prepared for decision maker positions at the top. Work in the new economy relies on a work force capable of rapid learning and technological skills. His point is that education must prepare people to take responsibility for their continuing education and be able to collaborate, think critically, and continually learn based on new data and experience. Reich speaks of the four competencies that need to be taught in order to develop smart workers. They are literacy, numeracy, responsibility, and finally, identity. Identity is a social, mental, interpersonal creative process, and highlights the concept that everybody must be a smart worker, that we must reconstruct the systems and redefine work and how kids work. To achieve this, school administrators must accept responsibility for working with teachers and students, inviting continuous incremental innovations at all levels, and fostering collaboration among parents, teachers, and community leaders.

Studies also repeatedly show that parental involvement is more important to academic success than the family’s income level. If this parental involvement is absent, the children suffer. Dr. James Boger (1989), a professor at Teachers College, Columbia University

stated that parents who are underinvolved in their child's education do not necessarily lack interest. Often they have not been afforded the appropriate opportunities, encouragement, and support from schools and society in general. For many parents, he says, there are several factors that present barriers to involvement in traditional home-school activities: school practices that do not accommodate the growing diversity of the families they serve; lack of parent time; child care constraints; negative personal experience with schooling; lack of support for cultural diversity; and primacy of basic survival needs.

Recommendations

The neighborhood, the school, and the community must be the three parts of the equation factored into the culture, caring and curriculum needs of the at-risk students. Specific recommendations include:

- * **Schools must move away from standardization and central planning to community building.** The community that houses schools must have people look at problems differently, understanding that people have different competencies.

- * **Schools need parents as active participants in order to be effective.** A crucial role of the teacher must be to recognize the professional competencies and expertise of parents and use them in the classroom.

*** Schools must set up mentoring programs to engage all students.** An example of one such program can be found in Kansas City which has embarked on a mentoring model called Youth Friends. It is a large scale mentoring effort that is trying to encourage a new norm instead of just trying to create a program. Youth Friends is a collaborative effort of schools, nonprofit agencies, and community leaders. Within three years, they plan to have the full number of adult volunteers matched with children from 5-17 years old in six school districts. Listening to the at-risk students, adults in Kansas City heard them say over and over again that they just needed someone to talk to. At the same time, school superintendents were telling the community that they needed more people to engage with the kids. One superintendent stated that most adults have no idea what a crisis the students are in. This concept is really about attempting to recreate community.

*** Schools need to remove impediments to school membership and academic engagement.** They must be helped to reinterpret what is going on. Otherwise, participants will continue to negotiate their own needs instead of working together to fix problems. Through apprenticeships, mentoring, teacher as coach, and learning to access resources, at-risk students can learn a pattern of work, a definition of themselves as competent. This creates work and enjoyment all at the same time.

*** Schools need to listen to the students regarding their own needs and what will help keep them in school.** When students have been questioned regarding their perceptions they have identified the importance of a significant adult who listens to them and therefore, we need to ask, listen and act.

*** Everyone must come to the table on an equal footing.** Parents and experts have much to contribute. Professor Boger (1989) asserted that “to be meaningful, enduring and effective, parent involvement has to be fully integrated into the structure and process of learning in school and not be treated as an adjunct project”. To do this the schools must train parents to participate effectively, giving them expertise in talking about four key elements which are: (1) instruction, (2) organization, (3) governance, and (4) accountability. People must be given a holistic sense about what they are doing. Designs cannot be talked about in the abstract. If you want people to participate on an equal footing, they need to be shown what some of the options are and what the planning process is. The goal of the school leadership should be to create competence for the people in the neighborhood.

*** Curriculum revisions to study cultural groups previously omitted from history must occur.** There are several dimensions to this recommendation. At-risk students generally represent various cultures and often feel alienated from the student body. In addition, the curriculum does not meet the needs of the at-risk

student, nor does it address multicultural experiences. By adopting a multicultural curriculum, greater understanding of the various cultures would be encouraged and in turn expected in schools. This could help break down some of the social barriers that the at-risk students contend with on a daily basis. Greater social acceptance leads to a better self concept, which in turn often reduces or reverses the drop-out spiral for some students.

*** There must be a redefinition of the work students do and how the students work.** Curriculum has to be more than democratic; it has to be activist.

Students must be given the opportunity to practice special kinds of knowledge such as intuition, judgment, and insight. Knowledge must be related to the reality of the students' experience (Newmann & Wehlage, 1993). We end up stopping at the abstractions and do not make the connections to working and living. Too often, this is where professional competence fall short (Mann, 1992). There must be a connection; the educators must reverse the process, talk about the experiences, and then attach the words and goals to the experience.

*** Teachers need to develop a repertoire of teaching strategies to meet the varied learning styles and needs of the at-risk students.** They need to deliver knowledge using different and varied methods of teaching that includes technology integration.

General perceptions and knowledge about the disenfranchised are especially true of at-risk students. The adults, including parents, teachers, counselors and administrators talk about what to do for at-risk students. Strategies are defined, plans are initiated, funding is expended, yet kids continue to drop out. In this entire equation about at-risk students it is rare or seldom that students are included in the planning and decision making that effects their current status and future lives. The time to stop talking “about” and instead talk “with” is long overdue. Talk related to action will help the at-risk students develop effective coping skills.

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